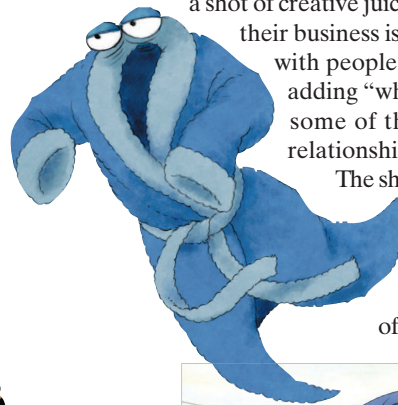


Digitas Health

A move toward mid-tier and specialty clients makes a restructuring pay off



“I’m not in a healthcare or pharma agency. I’m in an agency that’s full of innovation”

—Michael du Toit

Despite having to do a major restructuring that included laying off about 9% of its staff and weathering the departure of co-founder David Kramer in December, Digitas Health President Michael du Toit finds much to be positive about, calling 2011 “one of our best business development years ever.”

Marking the level of successes that this Publicis Healthcare Communications Groupe subsidiary had last year was its ability to scoop up 14 new accounts, bringing its brand tally to 63. Among the pick-ups were five enterprise/search engagements across multiple brands, which EVP and Global Chief Media Officer Matt McNally called a particular success because most agencies “tend to land a brand here or there.”

And du Toit says those successes tell an even bigger long-term story about the agency. “It sort of validates a strategy that we developed in the beginning of 2010 to really diversify our business into the mid-tier and specialty as well as wellness and biotechnology... prior to that our business was dominated by Big Pharma,”

he said, alluding to the agency’s decision to transform its client portfolio from one that was dependent on five “very large clients” to a \$100 million-plus agency that advises and creates outreach for 15 mid-tier businesses.

President and Creative Global Director Alexandra von Plato notes that verve of the smaller, newer companies includes the interest that they have in finding their own marketing groove. To do this, these companies are not only paying heed to what’s worked for others in the field, but are putting their own spin on things, using the insights they gather as signposts, instead of pathways. Or “a little less rear-view mirror and a lot more looking out towards the windshield,” is how McNally puts it.

This is not just another euphemism for “things change” on the client side, but is in fact a signal that the client relationship has become even more dynamic, a development that can also have an effect on the inner tempo of the agency itself. In this case, it’s been a shot of creative juice. “Clients that are in mid-tier...

their business is still going up, so you’re dealing with people who are excited,” du Toit said, adding “when your brand goes off patent, some of the excitement goes out of the relationship.”

The shakeup has also included an internal shift for the agency. The original structure was pretty simple: one big team to one big client. The new combination of large, medium and small clients



A campaign for Abilify used whimsical cartoon figures to illustrate a very real problem: depression

requires a different fluidity—teams work for multiple clients of varying scale, which means opportunities to bring on more people.

Du Toit says finding the right kind of talent to hit all of these spots is a bit of a challenge. One major part of the challenge is that a lot of the new accounts have a global component. But another formidable component comes from clients who have upped what they want from the agency. Those clients are not just piling on the consumer work but are also looking to hand over the global professional work and AOR designation as well. “That’s a very big ask,” he said. Altogether, the growth requires a distinct set of skills.

It also requires drawing on the experiences of a creative division that goes beyond the healthcare universe and includes employees that are grounded in



AT THE HELM

From left: Matt McNally (EVP and Global Chief Media Officer), Alexandra von Plato (President and Creative Global Director) and Michael du Toit (President)

PERFORMANCE

\$100-million-plus agency brought in 14 new accounts last year

HIGHLIGHTS

Landed five enterprise/search engagements across multiple brands

Due to new corporate strategy, the agency now advises and creates outreach for 15 mid-tier businesses

Additions to executive staff have broadened agency focus

Created two new key analytic tools that help clients decide how to allocate their dollars and priorities

Having smaller, newer companies as clients brings a heightened level of energy and creative thinking

CHALLENGES

Agency founder David Kramer departed in December 2011

Major agency restructuring led to laying off about 9% of staff

For contact details, service offerings and client roster, see Agency A-to-Z, beginning on page 181

fields as varied as journalism, finance and the automotive industry. The group essentially tag-teams with an in-house regulatory group that keeps its deliverables in line with regulatory. Von Plato says separating the groups was deliberate, because “our people are free to be creative with that safety net.”

Among the candidates who met these expansive requirements in 2012 were a slew of new hires and internal promotions that included: SVP, Head of Technology Pete Walker, who was the technical executive lead on the General Motors, ConocoPhillips and OnStar accounts at the sister agency, Digitas; SVP/Head of Marketing Tim Pantello, who joined to head up the Philadelphia office after overseeing client development as a managing partner for Tribal DDB; VP/Group Director of Mobile Innovation Geoff McCleary, who joined the agency after a stint at imc²; and Group Creative Director Craig Douglas, who founded Frontier Media Group, which is now Cadient.

A major part of what attracts people to Digitas, du Toit says, is the firm’s creative atmosphere. “It is the culture that we have,” he notes. “It’s tough to find an agency like Digitas Health outside, so it’s a wonderful world because it’s so eclectic. I’m not in a healthcare or pharma agency. I’m in an agency that’s full of innovation.”

Von Plato says the Digitas Health approach to consumers—giving consumers the necessary information to help them make decisions, as opposed to just making decisions for them—helps the agency identify and attract the talent that makes the most creative sense, because it requires an strategic adaptability that tracks with the sort of fluidity that consumers show when they flit between information sources.

Yet the Digitas Health crew isn’t content with simply changing their internal alignment and helping clients. It is also on a mission to transform the communications industry by redefining what it means to be an industry of record.

“The strategic initiative used to be in silos,” von Plato explains, and notes the time for designating one agency for print, another for digital, misses the entire point of 21st-century media because effective communication requires a fluency in the nuances of each communications platform and an appreciation for their interconnectedness. Von Plato’s example: “It’s not like I’m going to make an ad campaign for TV... it’s ‘how am I going to connect to my customer and how does that idea show up?’”

The agency has two key tools that help clients make this decision.

For audience profiles, the agency uses a Reality Framework that von Plato said “really seeks to understand the customer through a lot of different lenses, including their media diet.”

It then overlays this insight with a media mix tool it rolled out in 2011. What makes the agency’s analysis distinct is that it bypasses the tradition of simply relying on an examination of past media habits. Instead, Digitas Health’s tool takes a close look at the client’s

current media use, using the information obtained to help forecast what will be needed in the future, and where clients should put their money.

Digitas Health has had success with the sell, which accounts for 75% of its business and totals nine AOR designations as of this printing.

The embrace of one-agency one-narrative is also seen in the way the agency defines its clients and frames its work. “Digital is not an alternative channel. It’s how you wake up in the morning and start your day”



A YouTube ADHD effort (top) and the Epilepsy Advocate Facebook page show the firm’s digital skill

McNally says. This unified approach is also seen in how the agency explains its work distribution, which is that it explicitly avoids a description that puts digital work in its own bucket.

This is part ethos, but also goes beyond the concept of seamless consumer experiences and puts a value on digital work that takes a swipe at a popular perception that digital is a cheap way to reach an audience. “You’re spending more hours online with your device than on your laptop or on your television, so the experiences are more intricate,” he said.

Du Toit says the overall Digitas Health shift has been so effective, he expects the business to keep humming at about the same pace as last year.

“We’re very excited because we see sort of the world coming to us. We see so much brightness vs gloom,” he said. —Deborah Weinstein